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In recent years, we have had to change our whole concept of food and food policies.

That change has been forcibly thrust upon us for a number of reasons:

-- A revolutionary change has taken place in this century in our social structure from a largely rural society to one that is a massive complex of cities and giant megalopolis,

-- great technological advances in food production,

-- the need to collect, to store, to process, to transport vast amounts of food to the consumer,

-- a radical change in the eating habits of people,

-- the need for new food quality and safety standards,

-- a new awareness of the need to meet the nutrition requirements of people. We now know that we know very little about human nutrition, and its relation to health, mental development, and disease prevention.

The time is long past when we can merely concern ourselves with the production of food and its automatic delivery to the consumer.

Necessity demands that we have a total national food policy.

Necessity demands that this national food policy concern itself with every step in the long and complex chain of the national food system, from the farmer all the way up to the consumer.

In recent times, however, we have reached a point where, at least domestically and for a relatively high proportion of our people, the basic requirement for food is satisfied. It is out of this success that new, and in many ways, more difficult national nutritional problems arise:

- Production is often in excess of market demand and some farmers face potential economic collapse;

Remarks of Bob Bergland, Secretary of Agriculture before the Conference on Nutrition & the American Food System in Washington, D.C. Friday, , June 2, 1978 at 12:15 p.m.

- Production policies have the potential to encourage the production of agricultural commodities in proportions which, when consumed, do not represent balanced nutritional intake;
- Food distribution programs, while meeting the need for basic survival, often do not place sufficient emphasis on nutritional balance;
- Chemicals have been used so successfully to increase production, retard spoilage and preserve foods that now we are becoming concerned about the health effects of the chemicals themselves;
- Technological advances have been so dramatic that now we must fear the nutritional consequences of increasing ingestion of more highly processed foods;
- Traditional eating habits are changing dramatically, and we have an adequate knowledge of the effect of these changes on nutrition; and
- Faced with the constantly expanding variety of foods to choose from, consumers are ill-prepared to make food purchases within a context of nutritional adequacy.

Clearly, our food and nutrition problems are substantially different from those in earlier times. and, while we cannot simply dismantle the programs and policies which have brought us to this place, we must expand our view of the "food problem" in such a way that our programs and policies respond to the dilemmas facing us today.

This does not mean a policy of regulation and interference or bureaucratic control of our entire food system. It means, rather, that each segment in the food system must now assume new responsibilities, new restraints, and new perspectives of what food is all about -- its availability, its quality, its nutritional value and, finally, its price.

Food is too important to our national well-being, to its security and to the economy to permit each separate part of our vast food system to operate without regard to the overall national food objective which is -- simply stated -- constant, adequate supplies of good nutritional food for everyone in our nation and for those who buy and need our food abroad.

This means everyone must be involved.

It means the farmers -- where the food chain all starts.

It means the warehouseman and the food broker.

It means the transporter.

It means the processor.

It means the wholesaler and retailer.

And, yes, it means the consumer too.

A consumer-be-damned food policy is a luxury no single operator in the food system can afford.

If the farmers -- if the food broker -- the transporter -- the packer and the processor -- the wholesaler and retailer -- all assume their proper responsibilities to supply adequate and safe nutritional food and if they exercise restraint on price-add-ons at each step of the way, then the whole food system can continue to operate on a free enterprise, competitive and innovative basis.

An aware public is demanding no less from our total food industry and everyone directly connected with the food system must understand this.

We recognize it in the Department of Agriculture.

We insisted upon -- and held tough -- in our Administration demands that we had to have a farm policy and programs that would achieve these objectives: bring economic stability to the business of farming, assure adequate food production to fully meet our domestic and foreign obligations, establish a food reserve, and operate within the restraints of the budget and inflationary pressures.

As you know, we met considerable opposition to this policy of restraint and consumer and taxpayer protection.

But now it is working. After almost three years of depressed farm prices, we have turned things around for farmers.

Farmers now have some reasonable price protection so they can continue to operate and maintain the kind of food production the nation demands.

And this is important to consumers and to everyone else in the food system because without this miracle of farm production there would be no need for any kind of food policy.

But a farm policy is only part of a national food policy.

The combined efforts of all USDA efforts will allow us to solve the tough food, nutrition, and safety questions we face today.

For example, past USDA research has increased the protein content of wheat. Currently, we find unacceptably high residues of sulfa drugs in pig carcasses, and neither we nor the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has found the answer yet. Solutions to problems like this ultimately involve tracking the process all the way back to the farm, researching the cause, perhaps developing new production methods and providing technical assistance to farmers for their adoption. It takes people who know agriculture to resolve such problems.

On the food distribution side -- USDA, with its long experience in food procurement, has considerable expertise in writing specifications and drawing up contracts that meet federal inspection standards. Increasingly, we are sharing the knowledge with schools and institutional feeding programs to enable them to move into volume purchasing, buy directly from farmers, and negotiate tight, enforceable contracts with food vendors.

In response to a changing climate, the Department has been in the process of broadening its perspective. During the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, there was even an attempt to change its name to the Department of Food and Agriculture. Comprehensive new meat inspection provisions became law. The Food Stamp Program was born and food assistance and nutrition education for the poor improved markedly.

The momentum of that period carried over into the first term of the Nixon presidency. Food assistance programs expanded dramatically, following a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health in 1969.

It was during the second term of the Nixon Administration when this trend was arrested temporarily. The appointed USDA leadership sought to narrow the Department's focus to include only agricultural producers and the agri-business clientele. There was little support for the idea either within or outside the Department. But it did manage to impede progress and erode confidence in USDA'S capacity to protect the broad public interest.

To get food, nutrition, and consumer protection programs working well again, we have made a number of important steps to strengthen and streamline the Agency's operation. They are aimed at the implementation of a balanced food and nutrition policy.

We are ever mindful that each of these important components in our total food policy is not an end in itself with policies and regulations that have no relation or direct bearing on our final objective. Rather, every decision, every administrative step, every proposed regulation to carry out existing laws is made with regard of its effect on every other part of the food system.

We do not propose regulations on food safety and consumer protection set by law merely as an administrative exercise, or to harass industry or stifle competition.

We are not out to reform the food industry. All we ask is that it be responsive to new consumer needs and demands.

Innovation, enterprise, and competition have made the food industry what it is today -- an unparalleled leader in the world. And that includes the farmers and everyone else in the food system.

We cannot and we will not destroy that initiative.

But the nation -- its people -- demands that the whole food industry be preeminently responsible to the consumer. It is not the Department of Agriculture that insists on this -- the people do, and we are responding to that demand.

Thus, we are trying to formulate and carry out a sensible, realistic and acceptable national food policy. It is a policy that explicitly recognizes the linkage between nutrition, food consumption, food processing and agricultural production.

Nutrition policy is not new for the USDA. Since its authorization as a Cabinet-level Department, the Congress and the Executive Branch have relied heavily on the Department of Agriculture to formulate policies and administer programs to assure the continued production and distribution of an adequate and safe food supply.

In recognition of this, Congress has, over the years, given us the basic set of statutory authorities to administer such a nutrition policy.

In carrying out this policy we rely heavily on the cooperation of business and industry involved in the food system. Under our new program of public participation we vigorously seek involvement of the entire spectrum of our society and our economy. We make every conscientious attempt to involve them in decision-making before the fact.

We do not carry out our food quality and safety programs nor our nutrition standards by fiat or decree. Final decisions represent an acceptable consensus of everyone involved in the food system.

That is the only way an acceptable and workable national food policy can be made effective. There are no villains. There are no favorites. We do not play one against the other.

It is in this spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding of a common goal that this conference is being held.

We are indeed honored to participate in your discussions and decisions on an equal basis.

Thank you.

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